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ABSTRACT

Recently, the concept of gender has been introduced as a possible influence on hiring bias. To examine the relationship between gender perception and bias in hiring, a two-part study was conducted. In the initial phase, 99 college students developed descriptions of applicants that reflected gender characteristics. In the second phase, 63 college business students (31 females, 32 males) responded to one of the bogus applicants developed in phase one. The applicants were portrayed as feminine, androgynous, or masculine. Subjects were asked to indicate the likelihood that they would hire the applicant and the applicant's sex. An analysis of the results showed that the androgynous applicant was most desirable, and that the feminine applicant was least likely to be recommended for hiring. Furthermore, in line with cultural definitions of gender, masculine applicants were perceived as male, and feminine applicants were seen to be female. These findings show that gender is linked with sex in socially prescribed patterns, with women being devalued by stereotypes that do not allow them to be seen as possessing masculine traits. (Author/BL)

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Beyond Sex: The Influence of Gender Perceptions on Hiring Decisions

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Abstract

Two studies were conducted to determine the effects of gender perceptions on hiring desirability. In Study 2, subjects responded to recommendation forms (developed in Study 1) that portrayed applicants as feminine, androgynous, or masculine. Results indicated that the androgynous applicant was most desirable, and that the feminine applicant was least likely to be recommended for hiring. Furthermore, in line with cultural definitions of gender, masculine applicants were perceived as male, and feminine applicants were seen to be female.

The Influence of Perceptions of Gender on Hiring Decisions

Research concerning sex bias at the application stage of hiring procedures has indicated that women are rejected in favor of men with the same or poorer qualifications (e.g., Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975; Etaugh & Kasley, 1981; Firth, 1982; McIntyre, Moberg, & Posner, 1980; Rosen & Jerdee, 1974; Shaw, 1972). In order to explain this bias, researchers have looked for differences in career aspirations and job seeking styles (Leviton & Whitely, 1981), career dedication (Rossi, 1970), and quality of recommendation letters (Stake, Walker, & Speno, 1981); however, no sex differences have been found to account for the bias.

Recently, the concept of gender has been introduced as a possible influence on hiring bias. Gender refers to the culturally prescribed perception that people belong in mutually-exclusive categories, which have become standardized by the beliefs people have about the categories (Sherif, 1981). Research on gender characteristics has produced sets of distinguishing core characteristics labeled masculinity and femininity (cf. Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Masculinity reflects instrumental traits such as independent, competitive, and persistent (cf. Spence & Helmreich, 1978), which are seen as essential to success in the working world (cf. Schein, 1973; 1975). Since women are perceived to be feminine and to lack these traits (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), men are likely to be considered as better qualified for most jobs.

Researchers have examined the effects of gender on hiring decisions, finding bias in favor of masculine applicants and against feminine applicants (Francesco & Hakel, 1981; Hansson, O'Conner, Jones, & Milhelich, 1980). However, in these studies, the applicant's sex was indicated on

bogus resumes, a procedure which confounds sex with gender, introduces possible bias due to sex role appropriateness, and therefore provides little information on the effects of gender on hiring decisions. Researchers need to approach the question of whether discrimination occurs at the level of gender perception rather than the level of stated sex (cf. Terborg, 1977). If this could be determined, evidence for cognitive processes underlying hiring decisions would be provided. In addition, this approach could change the focus of sex bias to a factor outside the woman (i.e., gender perception), relieving her from being a victim of her own sex. The current studies were designed to examine gender bias in the absence of explicitly stated applicant sex, in order to determine the relationship between gender perception and bias in hiring. The present research was conducted in two parts: 1) a study used to develop descriptions of applicants that reflect gender characteristics, and 2) a study devised to determine whether differences in gender characteristics influence hiring decisions, and whether sex is perceived through gender.

Study 1

Method

Subjects. Ninety-nine introductory psychology students (59 males; 40 females) volunteered to fill out questionnaires in their classes.

Materials and procedure. To manipulate gender characteristics of the bogus applicants, a recommendation form was devised using items from the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). Nine applicants were described (three feminine, three androgynous, and three masculine). The masculine applicants were described by indicating that six of the eight traits from the masculinity scale of the PAQ were

"very characteristic" of the applicant, that six of the eight traits of the femininity scale of the PAQ were "not at all characteristic", and that the remaining four traits were "somewhat characteristic" of the applicant. The reverse was done for feminine applicants. Androgynous applicants were described by marking three of both feminine and masculine PAQ items as "very characteristic," three more of both as "somewhat characteristic," and indicating that the remaining four traits were "not at all characteristic" of the applicant. Each applicant within a gender (e.g., each of the three feminine applicants) was described by a different, randomly selected set of characteristics marked as very, somewhat or not all characteristic.

Subjects were run in groups and told that they would be rating a new recommendation letter form being tested to determine how effectively it described the personality characteristics of an applicant. Subjects read each of the bogus recommendation forms comprising one gender, without information concerning the sex of the person being described (each recommendation letter was identified by a letter and two numbers, e.g., "J85"), and responded to seven questions about the person using 11-point Likert style scales (e.g., "The applicant would be an excellent leader"; "The applicant is religious").

Results and discussion. Subjects' responses to the two target questions ("The applicant is masculine"; "The applicant is feminine") were analyzed using 2 (subject sex) x 3 (feminine, androgynous, masculine gender) x 3 (applicant) ANOVAs with repeated measures on the last factor. Main effects for gender of applicant were found in subjects' responses to both target questions, $F(2, 93) = 20.25$ and 21.61 for the masculine and feminine questions respectively, $p < .001$. Newman-Keuls tests indicated that

masculine applicants rated as more masculine and less feminine (M = 6.77 and 5.37 respectively) than were feminine applicants (M = 5.02 and 7.03 respectively). Androgynous applicants were rated between the two (M = 6.36 and 5.57 for masculine and feminine ratings respectively), all ps <.05.

These results indicate that (a) the trait description recommendation form is effective in eliciting perceptions of gender and (b) since there were differences in the extent to which applicants were perceived to be masculine or feminine, it was possible to select the most effective stimuli for use in the second study.

Study 2

Subjects. Students from two upper-level undergraduate personnel management classes (31 females; 32 males) were used as subjects, since business students react similarly to business executives and professional interviewers when evaluating applicant resumes (Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975; Hakel, Dobmeyer, & Dunnette, 1970; Landy & Bates, 1973).

Procedure and materials. Each subject responded to a bogus applicant using the recommendation form developed in Study 1. Subjects were run in groups and told that they would be evaluating the recommendation form of a recent university graduate applying for a managerial position in the marketing division of a bank. They were told that the recommendation letter was a form being tested to find out how effectively it measured applicant desirability.

Applicant descriptions were selected from those used in Study 1 by choosing the description that most clearly differentiated the gender of the applicant. For example, the feminine applicant for Study 2 was the applicant from Study 1 rated as most feminine and least masculine of the three feminine applicants. Selection of the androgynous stimulus applicant

for Study 2 was determined by neutral ratings (i.e., close to scale point 6) on both the masculine and feminine target questions. Sex was not indicated on the recommendation forms; a black line covered the space for the applicant's name to imply a concern for the anonymity of the applicants. A page separate from the recommendation form contained: a question which asked subjects to indicate, with a percentage, the likelihood that they would hire the applicant; manipulation checks presented in an 11-point Likert style format; and a question which asked subjects to mark whether they thought the applicant was male, female, or they didn't know or couldn't tell.

Results. Subjects' responses to the hiring desirability question were analyzed using a 2 (subject sex) x 3 (feminine, androgynous, or masculine applicants) ANOVA. This analysis yielded a main effect for gender of applicant, $F(2, 51) = 4.11$, $p < .02$. Newman-Keuls analyses of the means showed that the feminine applicant was less likely to be hired ($M = 35.79\%$) than the androgynous applicant ($M = 56.84\%$), but not the masculine applicant ($M = 48.68\%$), $p < .05$. Further post-hoc analyses using Scheffe's test revealed that the feminine applicant was less likely to be hired than the masculine and androgynous applicants combined ($M = 52.76\%$), $p < .05$. Thus, applicants with more masculine characteristics were more desirable than applicants with fewer masculine characteristics.

Chi-square analyses of the subjects' responses to the question concerning the sex of the applicant showed that most subjects saw the masculine applicant as male (70%), none as female; and that most subjects saw the feminine applicant as female (60%), only one as male, X^2 (4, $N = 63$) = 17.22, $p < .002$. "Don't know or can't tell" responses were evenly distributed across the gender types.

The 2 (subject sex) x 3 (feminine, androgynous, or masculine applicants) ANOVAs performed on two manipulation check items showed that the gender of the applicants was accurately perceived, $F(2, 57) = 37.67$ and 59.43 respectively, $p < .001$. Newman-Keuls tests showed that the feminine applicant was perceived as highest in the ability to get along with others ($M = 9.19$) followed by the androgynous and masculine applicants ($M = 6.05$ and 3.00 respectively) $p < .01$. Similarly, the masculine applicant was perceived to be the highest in the ability to handle pressure ($M = 9.48$), followed by the androgynous and feminine applicants ($M = 7.10$ and 2.81 respectively), $p < .01$.

General Discussion

The current studies were designed to develop a method for studying the effects of gender on hiring desirability, and to examine the effects of gender-related information on hiring decisions when applicant sex is not specified. Results indicated that gender has a strong effect on hiring desirability. Androgynous applicants were most likely to be recommended for hiring, and feminine applicants were given the lowest likelihood of being hired. These findings contradict other studies in which masculine applicants were preferred over feminine or androgynous applicants when sex was noted along with gender (Francesco & Hakel, 1981; Hansson et al., 1980).

Study 2 also provided evidence that sex is perceived through gender. Masculine applicants were thought to be male by many more subjects than were androgynous applicants; no subjects perceived feminine applicants to be male. Feminine applicants were perceived to be female much more often than androgynous or masculine applicants. These findings show that

gender is linked with sex in socially prescribed patterns, with women being devalued by stereotypes that do not allow them to be seen as possessing masculine traits. In terms of the work world, women are discriminated by culturally based perceptions that women cannot be masculine.

Further research should continue to explore the cognitive processes involved in hiring decisions, and how theymay be related to bias in these decisions. For example, it would be interesting to determine how and when decisions to follow gender perceptions are made. Lott (1982) reported that competent women are less likely to be devalued when job performance rather than general characteristics are known. Therefore, gender perception may be most important during initial hiring procedures.

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